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THE NOVEL IN AMERICA.¹

THREE hundred years ago Shakespeare declared that the function of the drama was "to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure." Admirable as this definition was for the Elizabethan drama, for the modern drama its demands are a trifle too strenuous; but as a definition of the modern novel, not one word will have to be changed. Though the youngest of literary forms, the novel has already distanced all competitors and become the popular vehicle of history, philosophy, speculation, political protest, social reform, and even of religion itself. It has not only usurped the place once held by the drama, but it speaks to an audience beside which the Elizabethan audience seems wizened and insignificant.

The career of the novel has not been unmarked by obstacles, chief among which may be noted the deep-rooted prejudice which once marked the attitude of the teacher and preacher to novels and novel-reading. This prejudice was partly an inheritance from the times when novels were nothing more than sentimental romances, and therefore not worth reading; but it was due also to the belief that fiction is false, and therefore injurious. The word "false," however, conceals a fallacy. The novel—I speak only of the great novel—is false to the letter that it may be true to the spirit. The novel is the modern parable, and the best defense of the novel is found in those words spoken of the Master himself: "Without a parable spake he not unto them."

Another charge brought against the novel is that it trains the emotional side of our nature and leaves the practical side undeveloped; that it divorces feeling from doing. Tennyson, you remember, says of Katie Willows:

¹A lecture delivered in the Teacher's Institute Course before the Central High School of Washington, D. C., November 25, 1902. A few copies were privately printed.

Less of sentiment than sense
Had Katie; not illiterate; nor of those
Who, dabbling in the front of fictive tears
And nursed by mealy-mouth'd philanthropies,
Divorce the Feeling from her mate, the Deed.

In other words, Katie had not lost the fine instinctive beneficence of girlhood by crying over novels. But does not this objection lie equally against all forms of art? Does not every picture, every statue, every piece of music, every great poem, cultivate primarily the æsthetic and emotional side of our nature? This, then, is not an objection against the novel in particular; nor is it a valid objection against art at all. It is merely a reminder that character is dual, and that true culture must show itself not merely in the detached life of reading and speculation, but in vital alliance with the institutions of society.

When we consider that Americans constitute to-day "the main branch of the English people" (to use J. R. Green's own words), outnumbering the English by about thirty millions, the Germans by about ten millions, and the French by about forty millions, it is a little surprising that the history of the novel in America has not yet been written. There are admirable histories of the English novel, of the German novel, and of the French novel, but none of the American novel. I shall try, therefore, to sketch in brief outline what seem to me the five distinctive stages in the development of the novel in America. Let us call it a drama in five acts.

I.

It has been customary to trace the origin of American fiction back to Charles Brockden Brown, of Philadelphia. In 1798 he wrote his first novel, "Wieland; or, The Transformation." But while Brown was our first professional man of letters, he cannot be called the founder of American fiction. A study of his life and work will show that, though he had a certain vogue in England, he did not permanently affect in any way the course of American fiction. His death, in 1810, occurred just a few years before Scott had freed the romance from affected sentiment and melodramatic diction.

A man who says that the channel of a river "was encumbered with asperities" was fitted, it would seem, to contribute something at least to American humor; but of humor, save perhaps unconscious humor, Brown had none. He represents, therefore, merely an already waning type of romance, a type that has never given to fiction a single permanent character.

The first character that strolls into American fiction, the first and almost the last to make a permanent place for himself at every American fireside, is the adorable Rip Van Winkle. The position of Washington Irving in the evolution of American fiction is strikingly analogous to the position of Addison in the evolution of English fiction. Neither Addison nor Irving was a novelist, yet both made of the essay a stepping-stone to the novel proper. Richardson wrote the first English novel, "Pamela," in 1742; but Addison's "Sir Roger de Coverley," written about thirty years before "Pamela," had proved that the essay could almost do the work of the novel. Irving's "Sketch Book" appeared in 1820. It was merely a collection of essays in the Queen Anne sense. Irving said, with characteristic modesty, that he had aimed only at "the familiar and faithful exhibition of scenes of common life." In these words and in the stories of "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," Irving has anticipated both the theory and the practice of the new school of writers, the mild-eyed realists, that arose fifty years later. Had Rip deferred his waking until after 1870, he would have found himself, as we shall see later, in most congenial company, for he was the progenitor of those numberless characters of local type and local flavor that succeeded the ghostly children of Hawthorne. Rip was not a national type; he was the product of a particular locality. The time was ripe, however, for a more national and representative creation.

II.

Three years after the publication of the "Sketch Book" James Fenimore Cooper inaugurated the second stage in American fiction by the publication of "The Pioneers." It has become customary among latter-day critics to make

merry over Cooper. His "females" do talk Johnsonese occasionally, and serve chiefly as "fainting appendages" to his fighting scenes. Some of his Indians, it must be admitted, suggest the Arthurian knights. But in the special studies of Miss Alice Fletcher and Horatio Hale, Cooper's Indian reappears and becomes more romantic and Arthurian than even Cooper had dared to portray him.

When we say that Cooper inaugurated three kinds of fiction—the novel of the sea, the novel of the American Revolution, and the Indian novel—we omit his chief contribution to American fiction. Irving had been successful in portraying at least one local type of character; Cooper undertook the more national type of the early pioneer. And his success cannot be better indicated than by reminding you that in France, Germany, Italy, and Spain the sales of Cooper's works equal the sales of Walter Scott's. "No author of fiction in the English language," says Cooper's latest critic,² "except Scott, has held his own so well for half a century after his death."

In the career of Natty Bumppo, or Leatherstocking, through five novels, Cooper has dramatized the westward movement of American civilization. He called his Leatherstocking stories "a drama in five acts." These five acts are, in the order of their history, "The Deerslayer," "The Last of the Mohicans," "The Pathfinder," "The Pioneers," and "The Prairie." They subtend a space of about sixty-five years of American history, and conduct their hero to a period just after the Louisiana Purchase of 1803.

"This outward expansion of population over a vast area of free land," says Prof. C. J. Bullock,³ "has been the fundamental fact in the economic history of the country. . . . The decade from 1880 to 1890 saw almost the complete disappearance of an 'American frontier.'" With the disappearance of the American frontier, there disappeared, of course, the American pioneer; but in the character of Natty

²See Thomas Wentworth Higginson's sketch in Carpenter's "American Prose," p. 148.

³See his "Introduction to the Study of Economics."

Bumpo, the vanished type will live as long as our literature endures. "Leatherstocking, Uncas, Hardheart, Tom Coffin are quite the equal of Scott's men," says Thackeray;⁴ "perhaps Leatherstocking is better than any one in 'Scott's lot.' La Longue Carabine is one of the great prize men of fiction. He ranks with your Uncle Toby, Sir Roger de Coverley, Falstaff—heroic figures, all, American or British—and the artist has deserved well of his country who devised them."

III.

Cooper did for our early history a service comparable at least to that which Scott did for early Scotch history. There is little of the art element and no philosophic meditateness in either Scott or Cooper. Cooper's style lacks distinction, as his plots lack condensation; but he lived long enough to witness the emergence and the passing of an unheralded genius who introduced into American fiction just those qualities in which his own work was signally deficient. In 1840 Edgar Allan Poe, who inaugurated the third period in American fiction, published his "Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque."

Prof. Brander Matthews⁵ asserts that in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) Poe created "the first detective story ever written." This can hardly be maintained. Godwin's "Caleb Williams" (1794) and Charles Brockden Brown's "Edgar Huntley" (1801) are detective stories, and they were written nearly a half century before Poe's story appeared. Poe did give distinction and separateness to the detective story as an art form, but this is by no means his greatest contribution to American fiction. Poe's peculiar service was that he stood resolutely, almost defiantly, for technic through its whole range of application. By theory and practice he pleaded for economy of incidents in fiction, for unity and compression, for skillful selection and inevitable convergence of details. There is about all of his work an air of incomparable self-attentiveness. He united in himself the sensi-

⁴See his paper "On a Peal of Bells."

⁵In his "Introduction to American Literature," p. 164.

bilities of the artist and the calculating intellect of the mathematician.

It is easy to say that Poe's range is narrow, that his characters have no blood in their veins, that he himself ranks highest as a manufacturer of cold creeps and a maker of shivers. Poe was not a creator of character. He threw the whole weight of his influence into the scale of form, of expression, of adaptation of means to end. And it was just this influence that was needed to counteract the loose-jointedness of construction then in vogue. But apart from his mastery of the mechanics of story-telling, Poe had style—that indefinable distinction of utterance which stamps the personality of the writer upon every product of his pen, which confers immortality upon craftsman and craftsmanship alike, and without which fertility of invention creeps on broken wing.

IV.

Poe died in 1849. Hawthorne's "Scarlet Letter" appeared in 1850. The two men had much in common. It is not surprising, therefore, that Poe was among the first to detect and to acknowledge the genius of Hawthorne. Both had style, both had constructive genius, and both knew the value of the vague. What Whittier said of Hawthorne in 1864 might have been said with equal fitness of Poe in 1849: "And so Hawthorne is at rest, the rest that he could not find here. God, the all-merciful, has removed him from the shadows of time, wherein he seemed to walk, himself a shadow, to the clear sunlight of eternity." Both are ranked by foreign critics as the greatest creative geniuses that our literature has produced, though Poe's popularity in Europe far surpasses that of Hawthorne.

But the difference between the two men as artists is more marked than the resemblance. Poe's work is not immoral; it is unmoral. It has no more to do with ethical problems than has the song of the nightingale. Hawthorne, on the other hand, is nothing if not ethical. It is this dominant ethical note that makes his work the beginning of a new period in American fiction. Poe's domain was the nerves,

Hawthorne's the conscience; and inasmuch as most readers, men at least, are more nervous than conscientious, Poe lords it over the wider territory. The mystery of evil, the gnawings of conscience, the relief of confession, these are the themes that Hawthorne handles with a mastery unmatched; but the vague terror that Poe inspires is not due to any violation of the law of conscience, but to a skillful massing of fearsome details.

Another difference, and one that makes Hawthorne's work foreshadow the fifth and last distinctive stage in American fiction, is the sense of locality in his stories. He complained while he was writing "The Marble Faun" in Rome that he felt cramped outside of New England. Can you imagine Poe's being influenced by local attachments? His land was neither north nor south of Mason and Dixon's line, but stretched east of the sun and west of the moon.

V.

The decade that included our Civil War was not productive of fiction of a high order, but since 1870 American literature means little more than American fiction. The appearance in 1870 of Bret Harte's "Luck of Roaring Camp" meant, as we now see plainly enough, that the curtain had gone up for the fifth act in the history of American fiction. It meant that our fiction was to become intensely local and vividly realistic. It meant an unconscious return to the local type inaugurated by Irving, but with a rigid exclusion of the romantic and impossible. American writers were now to busy themselves with the interpretation of life at close range. Influenced in part, perhaps, by the contemporary novelists of Russia and France, our latter-day story-tellers are reproducing, sometimes with tedious detail, those everyday aspects of local society which their great predecessors generally idealized or ignored. Eggleston's and Riley's Hoosiers, Miss Wilkin's and Miss Jewett's New Englanders, Mr. White's Kansans, Mrs. Peattie's Nebraskans, Octave Thanet's Arkansas philosophers and Iowa mechanics, Mr. Garland's Iowa and Wisconsin villagers and backwoodsmen, Mr. Page's

Virginians, Miss Murfree's Tennesseans, Mr. Cable's Creoles and Acadians, Mr. Fox's Kentucky mountaineers, are so many studies in local Americanism. Hardly a month passes that some new State or Territory is not added to the geography of American fiction. American life is being represented by districts and sections, by dialects and specialized types. Birnam wood is moving to Dunsinane. Politically we are one nation, but in fiction we are back under the old Articles of Confederation; or, more accurately, the State rights idea prevails, for our writers pay allegiance first to the State. We have attained to what Mr. Mabie aptly calls "sectional self-consciousness," but not to complete "national self-consciousness."

To the future Macaulay of our history these works will be invaluable for their local color and their fidelity to local environment; but they will prove permanent contributions to American fiction only in so far as the writers have learned how to be local in theme without being provincial in art. To live, these stories must enable the reader to interpret the particular in terms of the universal. Many of them, however, leave the impression of being written for no other purpose than to exploit a lot of unknown and vacant characters in terms of an impossible dialect.

VI.

Is it possible to differentiate American fiction as a whole from English and continental fiction? It seems to me that this problem may be best met by a brief survey of the work of Richardson and Fielding, the two founders of the modern novel. The points of view of these two men, their respective attitudes toward life and literature, were dissimilar even to antagonism; and it has been most fortunate for the healthy development of the novel that its founders put upon their pages, a hundred and fifty years ago, the two dissimilar but permanent types of character that have ever since continued to reappear. The plots of both are about equally probable; but Fielding's characters would fall foul of Richardson's were they to meet on the public highway, and every typical

American that happened to be passing would swell the Fielding forces. Richardson is constantly emphasizing the prestige and privilege that go with wealth and rank; his women exhibit more sensibility than sense, and his gentlemen *par excellence* are "faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null."

In Fielding there is none of this coldly calculating prudence or rigid insistence on code and creed. He believes that "A man's a man for a' that . . . and a' that." His insight into character is not deeper than Richardson's, but saner. He loves manliness, but can sympathize with generous frailty. Indeed, Fielding coined or at least gave currency to the expression "amiable weakness," an expression that reveals no little of its author's character and art. The distinction, then, between Richardson and Fielding is not the old distinction between reputation and character, but between formal propriety and native impulse, a distinction universal in its scope and one which brings into relief the most characteristic trait of American fiction.

Whatever else American novelists may have done, they have stood as a whole consistently with Fielding for the dignity and worth of simple manhood and simple womanhood stripped of all the adventitious aids that are conferred by superior birth and sounding title. "Robin Hood, the popular hero, could not be quite heroic," says Dowden,⁶ "were he not of noble extraction and reputed Earl of Huntingdon." American novelists, on the contrary, have stood for equality before the law, equality of opportunity, equality of privilege, and equality of human interest. In other words, American fiction has from its inception been intensely democratic, and it is this note of pure democracy that differentiates it as a whole from the fiction of other countries.

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⁶"Studies in Literature," p. 476.